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Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The CIA's Admiral

Caustic corridor gossip criticizing CIA Director Stansfield Turner for signing even routine memoranda as "Admiral" finally wrought a change: He no longer signs that way.

Unfortunately, the change is only cosmetic. Turner, one of the Navy's brightest stars who was shanghaied by President Carter to run the beleaguered Central Intelligence Agency, perceives his CIA job as a way-station to greater military glory.

Both friends and non-friends of the brainy, barrel-chested admiral are convinced that Turner got a deal from Jimmy Carter. He is believed to have told his former Annapolis classmate: I don't want the CIA job; I want to be Chief of Naval Operations or chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But Carter, smarting from the collapse of his first CIA choice of lawyer-politician Ted Sorensen, would not take no for an answer.

So, the President gave Turner the job without requiring him to resign his naval commission, with the implicit understanding of a future high-level Pentagon post. Once again, the weakened CIA, badly needing a strong director

over the long run, is back in the hands of a short-term caretaker.

The real interests of this nation's intelligence community, costing billions of dollars every year, were sacrificed to the needs of the man in the White House to quickly name a widely acceptable director after the Sorensen fiasco. President Ford also sacrificed CIA interests when he named George Bush CIA director, knowing Republican politician Bush would last in that job no longer than the Republican who appointed him.

But there was a difference. Bush renounced all political aspirations for 1977 (perhaps costing him the vice-presidential nomination). Turner renounced nothing.

Moreover, he has flaunted his real loyalties by isolating himself in his new inner office, located not at CIA's Langley, Va., headquarters but across from the White House in the Executive Office Building. That guarantees him access to the Oval Office. Indeed, the President now seems more impressed by what he hears from Turner than by his daily briefings from Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security adviser.

Turner's supporters vigorously deny that he is all that scarce at CIA headquarters. They claim Turner spends 70 per cent of his time there, only 30 per cent next to the Oval Office. Turner defenders also point to Senate legislation to establish a "Director of National Intelligence," a post that Turner, or a successor, would occupy in the office of the President. That would leave special deputies running the CIA and other intelligence units.

Even if true, however, this does not answer the stockpile of complaints about Turner. He has removed himself from regular contact with his own officers in the CIA; surrounded himself with at first four, now nine, top inner-office Navy aides; insisted on a military ritual before seeing CIA officers (requiring a precise memo explaining why the admiral should be bothered, plus a 24-hour wait).

Though trivial in itself, some critics feel that most symptomatic of his lack of interest in the CIA's well-being was his decision to put his son, Navy Lt. Geoffrey Turner, on the CIA payroll. The job is "junior assistant" in the Office of National Intelligence Estimates.

Old hands at the CIA contrast this with the conduct of a former CIA chief, whose son had a summer clerk's job at CIA but was sent packing the day his father took the oath of office. The contrast does not help sagging morale.

Beyond morale is the vital matter of building back this nation's intelligence system during rising competition from the Soviet Union. To convince the CIA that he can be the architect for rebuilding, Turner must change the CIA's perception of him as a transient—a temporary custodian whose purpose is to avoid mistakes that might deflect him from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

That is by no means impossible. If, however, Turner's conduct in the future continues as it has in the past three months, further decline in the chief U.S. intelligence bulwark is assured.

That spells danger for an organization that has been horsewhipped in one kangaroo court after another—generally for following direct orders from Presidents of the United States. The horsewhipping from the outside has eased a little, but Turner has not yet started the rehabilitation.

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